

325: Creating Emotional Safety in Your Relationship



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Jen Riday

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You're listening to the Vibrant Happy Women podcast. I'm Dr. Jen Riday, and on this episode I'm talking about how to create emotional safety in your marriage or other significant relationships. Stay tuned.

Hi, I'm Jen Riday. This podcast is for women who want to feel more vibrant, happy, aligned, and alive. You'll gain the emotional, physical, and spiritual tools you need to get your sparkle back and ensure that depression, anxiety, and struggle don't rule your life. Welcome to the Vibrant Happy Women Podcast.

Hey there my friends. So, emotional safety. I think we all know we want it. It sounds amazing but what is it and why do we need it? I believe emotional safety to be the ability to feel safe in revealing our true self to another person. We will often feel capable of being vulnerable, being authentic when we feel emotionally safe. And I believe also that when we feel emotionally safe we feel as if the other person truly sees us, hears us, values us, and even loves us.

So, if you're not feeling those things in your marriage or in your relationship with a significant other this episode is for you. So emotional safety again is the ability to feel safe in revealing your true self to another person. Now, the foundation of emotional safety is interesting, revealing your true self. To start to feel emotionally safe you really do need to start with yourself, who is your true self, do you know her? Who are you truly at the heart level? We all think we have beliefs and that we have values.

But I want to pull it back and help you see that every belief that you have is simply a thought you've thought a lot of times. A thought that has generated a good result for you, it's worked for you. So, you choose to keep it as a belief and a belief that you assign significance to becomes a value.

325: Creating Emotional Safety in Your Relationship

You've heard me say on this podcast before that my parents were taught that hard work is essential, it is the top most important value to be a hard worker. Where did they get that thought or belief? Well, they heard it again and again from their families of origin. They had experience with that, that belief working and giving them results they want and so that became a part of their identities. So emotional safety really does start with identifying what you believe and think to be true.

All of us have beliefs about ourselves but also beliefs about how other people should act based on these values. You could call this kind of a blueprint. We have a blueprint for how our spouse should act. And what is your blueprint? If you were to journal about this right now, how should your partner, your husband, your spouse behave? Maybe you believe they should take out the trash and unload the dishwasher. They should be good at cooking. They should kiss you goodbye every morning and tell you that they love you every night.

You have beliefs that you have thought so many times, thoughts that you've thought so many times that they've become beliefs and sometimes even values. And this blueprint if it does not match the blueprint of your partner who has an entirely different set of beliefs and values based on their experiences it can generate a feeling of emotional unsafety, lack of emotional safety. So, you need to know what's important to you, who you are, how you think, what you believe, your values and then start to identify how your partner thinks and beliefs, and what values that they have.

These blueprints might not match but at the foundation when you can pull back and decide that, these are just my blueprints, that doesn't make them better than my partner's blueprint. These are my beliefs, my thoughts, my values, they are not better than my partner's, even though my parents do believe both of them that hard work is the top value, I do not share that belief. And I recognize their right to assign that as the most important belief,

325: Creating Emotional Safety in Your Relationship

to prioritize that value, that belief but I don't prioritize it the same. But I can respect that they do.

How does this look in a marriage relationship for example? I prioritize a clean and organized house much more highly than my spouse does. That is not important to him. So, my husband will often bring me research studies that show that kids that grow up in more mess and chaos have more creative minds. He tries to find support for his belief system, his value, the result he wants. Well, if I were to cling to the idea that my value is correct and his is wrong it would lead to conflict. He would not feel emotionally safe, and neither would I.

So, this knowing of what you value, what you believe and what you think is essential to starting to create that emotional safety. Now, that is just the thoughts aspect, the thoughts, and beliefs, and values aspect of this. It goes so much deeper. So, I have been sharing a workshop where I cover all of this very in depth, not just the thoughts but I like to talk a little bit more about the vagus nerve, toning the vagus nerve. Now, I'm going to explain that in a minute. But if you want to get the full workshop go grab it at jenriday.com/safe, jenriday.com/safe.

The workshop is free. You can watch the replay immediately and get a sense of what I shared in the workshop about toning your vagus nerve. Now, let me explain this aspect. For many, many years I wanted my husband to change. He should be more emotionally empathetic with me. He should be more sensitive. He should remember my birthday. Well, after a decade or more of that not working, he wasn't going to change. Isn't that the funniest lesson we will need to learn in marriage or in relationships? He wasn't going to change.

I had to change because there was no other option. I decided to prioritize my happiness and let him think what he wanted to think. I started to respect that his values were different than mine. He believed and thought differently

[Vibrant Happy Women](#) with Jen Riday

325: Creating Emotional Safety in Your Relationship

than me and that's okay. We figured out ways to compromise. But that was all fine and good. It didn't get us to the core of emotional safety until I came to understand how the vagus nerve works to either kind of amp us up and activate our fight, or flight, or freeze, or kind of amp us down and push us down more towards the depression side of things.

We can go amp up towards anxiety or amp down toward depression or we can regulate right there in the middle. So, with that in mind, instead of always looking at behaviors in my partner, I pulled back and started to watch how I thought he seemed to be feeling. And I put that side by side with how I was feeling. You see, my husband and I to some extent, all of us to some extent, have some history of trauma, either big T Trauma or little t trauma, struggles, death, hardship, financial struggles. We all have things. We all have interesting interactions from our families of origin.

Well, my husband grew up with a mom who probably has bipolar disorder and is also on the autism spectrum. He developed what is called an insecure attachment style. A lot of us have this. That's not a problem. But that attachment style, that trauma wired his limbic system of his brain, the emotional region of his brain to be a little bit overactive. His amygdala which kind of initiates the whole process of responding to stimuli out there was overactive because of how he was raised.

Things that would not feel like a threat to most people feel like a threat to my husband. So much so that if I'm too emotional in either direction if I'm too happy he gets worried. If I'm a little bit sad he's nervous and his guard is up because his amygdala in the limbic area of his brain is overactive in response to his history of the past, his growing years with his parents. When I ignored his emotional response, his trauma history, his limbic system, and his vagus nerve, how this all works together to pump up his system to protect himself, I missed the ship. I missed the important information, I missed the train.

325: Creating Emotional Safety in Your Relationship

So, in this workshop I'm sharing for free, how to create emotional safety in your marriage, again it's at jenriday.com/safe. Go watch it. I share some tips and tools on how I am helping to tone or calm the amygdala response, not just in my husband but in myself. The beauty about being a married couple and working on this together is you can be very close in close bodily contact, close eye contact. You can start mirroring your breath.

You can do this vagal toning work to kind of calm the trauma response in the brain which enables more emotional safety together. You can do it together really well when you live with someone, when you can be physically close. For example, when I first started doing this I one morning got into bed after I had brushed my teeth, got back into bed, and cuddled with my husband. And I was fascinated to hear his breath was kind of like this – and I was shocked. And I kind of said, “What’s going on, are you really stressed out? Did you have a bad dream?”

He said, “Why?” He didn’t really respond, he just said, “Why?” And I said, “Well, your breath is so shallow, that tells me your body’s in fight or flight.” And he didn’t deny it, so I didn’t press things. But what I did do was just lie there and be present with him, recognizing that all of his thoughts, all of his emotions were happening as a result of what was going on in the limbic system of his brain, based on a dream or some anxious thought he had at that moment.

And I was lying next to him, and I just concentrated on keeping my emotional nervous system, limbic system regulated, breathing deeply and slowly, inhaling for three, exhaling maybe a little bit longer, inhaling, exhaling. I did nothing, I said nothing, I wasn’t trying to change him. But it was fascinating that just with that close contact and because our brains have mirror neurons which will mirror the emotional response of the people in whose presence we are, his breath began to slow. His nervous system began to sigh a lot.

325: Creating Emotional Safety in Your Relationship

I heard him yawning, all of these behaviors are a sign that his nervous system was metabolizing all of that cortisol and returning back to the rest and restore state of calm and safe. Notice I didn't have to lecture him to create emotional safety for me. I didn't have to do anything but use my breath, my body, my presence, my own emotional intelligence to help generate a shared emotionally safe space for the two of us while we were spooning that morning.

And it was fascinating because I didn't have to really do anything but be regulated myself. So, I started then from that point to experiment with a number of tools that help to regulate us when we're dysregulated emotionally. And I've been fascinated how much of a difference that makes in our marriage. In the past when my husband was grumpy or critical I took it personally and I just thought, he's being a jerk.

But now pulling back and analyzing this all from the perspective of the nervous system I recognize when he's starting to get hypercritical much like some of my kids. They need a bit of help regulating. And isn't that a beautiful gift we can give in our relationships? The same thing as I learned to share coregulation strategies, my husband can do it for me. He knows that if I'm nervous or stressed that we can have a good cuddle, or a good chat and he can mirror a calmer response with his deep breath.

We can do this for children who are having a tantrum. It does no good to talk and try to talk through it until they've regulated, so we can look them in the eyes and breathe, and calm them down. So, there are a number of other tools well beyond breathing that help us regulate our nervous systems and that we can use to help our partners and spouses coregulate with us. We can teach these tools to our kids, use them in our homes.

And you'd be surprised how much more quickly you begin to feel calm, steady, and emotionally safe as a baseline well beyond all of these talking strategies that don't really get us anywhere if we aren't addressing the

[Vibrant Happy Women](#) with Jen Riday

325: Creating Emotional Safety in Your Relationship

baseline limbic emotional things going on in our nervous systems. So, if you would like to learn more and watch my free workshop you can get that at jenriday.com/safe, jenriday.com/safe. It's really good, it's interactive. I think you'll love it.

So, I'm going to be talking a lot more about polyvagal theory, vagal meaning the vagus nerve, vagal nerve toning, relaxing our amygdala response. We have just lived through a pandemic. A lot of us don't feel like we have the resources to reach out, and connect, and be intimate, and be vulnerable because we're self-protecting. We all need to calm ourselves. And as we learn these tools for ourselves thank heavens for the mirror neurons. The people in our proximity, the people around us pick up on our mood so fast.

As we learn to regulate, our spouses can then regulate, everything comes down to a baseline that's calmer and more emotionally safe. Now, of course, there are so many more things, I can't mention them all here. We have boundaries. We have thoughts and feelings, actions, results, thought tables, the feel it to heal it method, EFT tapping, so many powerful tools that really help us regulate our nervous systems, the foundation of a healthy marriage.

So if you'd like to learn more and get involved in that again go to jenriday.com/safe, watch the workshop and let me know what you think, send me an email at support@jenriday.com and tell me your thoughts, tell me how this is working for you because for me and for tons and tons of other women, it's making a huge difference to stop trying to change our partners and just think about generating co, co, and doubly emotionally safe spaces to be together in relationship.

So, to recap, you could spend years trying to get people to change behavior, but I can promise you, when you address the emotional and nervous system responses going on in the body, often learned through

[Vibrant Happy Women](#) with Jen Riday

325: Creating Emotional Safety in Your Relationship

decades of experience, through childhood and beyond, when you start to address that and train your nervous system to regulate, to calm, to step out of fight or flight, it's so much easier to be safe, and seen, and heard, and valued in relationship because you're both feeling safe.

Well, my friends I love you, you deserve to feel seen, heard, valued and safe, to be able to reveal your true self to another person, and really the first step is creating that emotional safety and emotional regulation for yourself and letting it expand to your partner, to your kids, and it's beautiful and it makes a lifechanging difference. I love you. I will see you again next time. Until then make it a vibrant and happy week. Take care.

If you enjoy this podcast, you have to check out the Vibrant Happy Women Club. It's my monthly group coaching program where we take all this material to the next level and to get you the results that will blow your mind. Join me in the Vibrant Happy Women Club at jenriday.com/join.